



## Military Intelligence in Africa: Network Lens and Culture-Centric Focus<sup>1</sup>

Dries Putter<sup>2</sup>, John Melkon II<sup>3</sup> and Brock A. Salgado<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract:

The evolving dynamics of US-China competition in Africa are examined with respect to military presence, soft power, and intelligence. A network-centric approach with sensitivity to cultural understanding is explored for US military intelligence (USMI) on the African continent, i.e., identifying key nodes, link creation, and centrality within the African intelligence network. Challenges and risks are acknowledged. A comprehensive approach is proposed, including private sector involvement, to maximize USMI's impact and resilience in the African environment. Key recommendations pivot on network-centricity in Africa, US-Africa intelligence services collaboration, and strategic partnerships to effectively navigate the complex geopolitical landscape and counter Chinese influence.

### Keywords:

Military intelligence; Africa; United States; network-centric.

---

<sup>1</sup> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12700/jceeas.2025.5.3.385>

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Stellenbosch University, Researcher, African Research Institute, Óbuda University, Hungary; ORCID: 0000-0002-1865-6054; putter@sun.ac.za.

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor of Geography at the United States Military Academy at West Point; ORCID: 0009-0005-2740-2493; john.melkon@westpoint.edu.

<sup>4</sup> Researcher, West Point, USA; brock.a.salgado.mil@army.mil.

## *Introduction*

In April 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) released a declassified report coinciding with U.S. intelligence officials' congressional testimony on imminent threats to the United States. The report emphasized China's multifaceted efforts to expand its influence globally, drive a wedge between the U.S. and its allies, and promote norms favorable to its authoritarian system.<sup>i</sup> It underscored that Chinese leadership perceives the intensifying competition with the U.S. as a significant geopolitical shift, prompting more aggressive strategies. This contrasts with a 2013 Rand Corp publication<sup>ii</sup>, which characterized Sino-African relations as centered on resource extraction, infrastructure, and manufacturing, contrasting with U.S. focus on trade in technologies, services, and aid policies promoting democracy and governance. While China's unconditional approach to African development could fuel corruption and state capture, it doesn't inherently conflict with U.S. economic and political objectives. Chinese-built infrastructure can reduce operating costs, support market expansion, and benefit all investors. As such, Presidents Bush and Obama rejected a potential zero-sum notion in the competing interests for access and influence in the region and is thus not (at the time – circa 2013) not necessarily a strategic threat to US interests in Africa.<sup>iii</sup> Since then the competition expanded from economic development to include the pre-positioning of expeditionary infrastructure by China which could call into question the expressions by Bush and Obama.

The authors explore the viability of increased US collaboration with African states based on partnerships and cooperative ventures – specifically in the field of intelligence as a vital enabler to the US-Africa strategic relationship under pressure from countries such as China. They suggest a network-centric approach to US military intelligence (USMI) operations in Africa, utilizing people networks to grasp the complexity of the operational environment. This strategy is vital for the US to compete effectively on the continent.

## *Competing National Security Interests*

Since its establishment in 2003, the US presence at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti has been significant. Djibouti also hosts Chinese, French (with Italian, Spanish, and formerly German troops), Japanese, Saudi Arabian, and United Arab Emirates bases. Currently, the US maintains around 7,000 military personnel deployed temporarily in Africa, mainly focused on supporting humanitarian and emergency response efforts and conducting joint operations with African forces against extremists. They have established or maintained presence in Uganda, South Sudan, Senegal, Niger, Gabon, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Additionally, over 2,000 US soldiers are engaged in training or advisory missions across more than 40 African countries, with Special Operations Forces operating from forward bases in Kenya and Somalia. France also has a significant presence, with over 7,500 military personnel



deployed on the continent, particularly in the Sahel region, connecting Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.<sup>iv</sup>

Directly challenging NATO strategic interests, China established its first African military base in Doraleh, Djibouti, in 2017. This poses a significant strategic challenge to the long-standing US naval base at Camp Lemonnier, potentially accommodating China's largest ships, including aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, with an adjacent naval pier. Unsatisfied with this initial foothold, China aims to expand its military presence along the East African coast, possibly in Tanzania, and has ambitious plans for the West African coast.

On the soft power front, in the past decade the Chinese have committed \$60 billion in infrastructure and development investments, while simultaneously increasing the number of embassies on the continent to 52.<sup>v</sup> China has forged numerous shared vehicles for capacity building, technology sharing, and collaborative initiatives in local government and sectors like law enforcement, agriculture and security. China is not only the African continent's paramount trade partner, but also the creditor to which the continent is beholden. Some of these exploits are clearly visible in the belt and road initiatives<sup>vi</sup> to revive Chinese trade routes to Africa and furthermore for infrastructure development (a major focus area for China<sup>vii</sup>) and the roll-out of Confucius Institutes<sup>viii</sup> on the continent for cultural, ideological and intelligence objectives.

Then there is the soft underbelly of soft power. China has organized countless exchanges<sup>ix</sup> for African professionals, civil servants, and politicians—and continues to do so. Quoting Paul Nantulya, “[a] key pillar of China’s efforts to gain influence in Africa and globally is to create impressions of universal support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Central to this is the political strategy known as the “United Front” (tǒngyī zhànxiàn; 统一战线) to mobilize individuals and institutions outside the Party and around the world to advance the interests of the CCP and isolate its adversaries.” According to the US National Defence University’s African Center for Security Studies, the Chinese African strategy centers on “personal and professional ties, diffusing norms and models, and forging ideological and political bonds of solidarity”.<sup>x</sup>

### *Competition from China on the African Continent*

China recognized long ago that “Africa's six maritime chokepoints carry a third of the world's shipping. Economic growth on the continent has accelerated in recent decades, and Africa is increasingly an engine of the global economy. This engine is partly fueled by vast deposits of rare earth minerals – critical ingredients of the world's transition to clean, sustainable energy – and by the human capital of a swelling population that will account for a quarter of humankind by 2050”<sup>xi</sup>, a statement featured prominently in the AFRICOM 2023 Posture Statement to the US Congress.

Chinese engagement in Africa commenced shortly after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) providing material support to various African independence movements. During the 1950s, China

hosted African resistance members at Nanjing Military Academy and other institutions. By 1960, they had trained thousands of militias, facilitated arms deals with African delegations, and deployed military instructors across the continent. China's involvement extended to participating in the All-Africa Peoples Congresses, precursor to the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and later, the African Union (AU), focused on decolonization. By 1963, China became the primary weapons supplier, advisor, and trainer, establishing the Liberation Committee in Tanzania to oversee armed resistance until the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994.

The PLA, historically, maintained a relatively minor presence in Africa, particularly in contrast to other adversaries of the United States, such as Cuba and the USSR with her Warsaw Pact partners who deployed hundreds of thousands of troops throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. With fewer than 20,000 at any one time, and rarely in any direct combat role, the PLA pursued soft power initiatives to influence ideological, economic, and political norms.<sup>xii</sup> This politico-economic and politico-military focus has been sustained under the Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). While PLA's troop numbers in Africa do not reach those of the United States, France and the UK, their presence is closely coordinated under economic, cultural, political, and ideological efforts in a larger whole of government, or "total war," approach that the PRC has adopted for decades. Great Power competition is likely to change this though, especially in light of their pledge towards "substantiating China-Africa relations, advancing in-depth China-Africa cooperation across the board and leading and promoting international cooperation with Africa."<sup>xiii</sup>

Having built the African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2018, the Chinese have exploited the construction and cyber infrastructure to conduct a deceptive, predatory campaign. They have built or renovated nearly 200 government buildings across Africa, complete with donated computers connected to dubious 'secure' telecommunications networks. These projects grant China unprecedented access, following its pattern of using them for "political advantage" and "industrial espionage".<sup>xiv</sup> Beijing can leverage this presence to conduct surveillance on African officials and business leaders, promoting autocratic, police-state governance models. This presents a threat to U.S. efforts in Africa and further afield, as China typically utilize surveillance (spying) as an enabler for their companies, spy on U.S. officials, and exert influence African officials. American officials should probably operate with the assumption that all their communications with African governments are monitored by the Chinese.<sup>xv</sup>

In spite of this intense competition the previous Commanding General of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), Stephen Townsend said the U.S. doesn't have to lose its access or influence. "We don't have to compete with China head-to-head, dollar for dollar," he stated. "We can target where our investments are best made."<sup>xvi</sup> Current Commander Michael Langley has doubled down on this principal noting that a "toolkit of security cooperation and operational authorities helps African partners to fight 21st century terrorists and criminals, providing clear alternatives to unfavorable and opaque



deals with Russia or the PRC. Whole of nation investments in Africa are opportunities for America to demonstrate global leadership while reinforcing the international rules-based system across all domains of commerce and defense.”<sup>xvii</sup>

With the cost savings from the 2022 US departure from Afghanistan, there is an opportunity to re-evaluate how to invest in international security efforts in Africa, without being driven by urgent crisis. The US should soberly consider where to target its comprehensive national investments in Africa to counter China's increasing influence and surveillance capabilities on the continent.

### *Intelligence in the 21st Century*

USA spending on the Intelligence Community (IC) was drastically reduced in the faux “peace-dividend” following the perceived end of the Cold War. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 less than a decade later forced Congress to revamp their investments in US intelligence to thwart the terrorist threat, albeit in an entirely different way. As a result, the post 9/11 IC is focused on surveillance capabilities and intelligence products suited for direct-action kinetic strikes on extremist adversaries.<sup>xviii</sup> Meanwhile, the PRC quickly perfected its ability to analyze massive amounts of data (or big data) and incorporate new technological domains into its intelligence strategy. On the African continent, China has been spreading massive volumes of mis- and disinformation and has unified its military and corporate intelligence apparatuses.<sup>xix</sup> Likewise, Russian intelligence and ‘private’ security exploits have been playing a numbers game in hopes that one of their exploitative actions sticks, strategically.<sup>xx</sup> Violent extremist organizations in the region have been even more adept in their information operations (IO) – a direct result of their impressive and locally relevant human and cyber-network intelligence capabilities.<sup>xxi</sup> Simultaneously, intelligence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been redefined by ‘big data’ that is both created and consumed thanks to rapid developments in artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), social media, robotics, and the increasing use of the internet, cellphones, and geographic positioning systems (GPS), among many other advancements.<sup>xxii</sup>

However, this new technology and revolution in military affairs, to quote a George Bush speech, is no real revolution at all. The “money [and technology] can do anything”-attitude which has prevailed in the US IC is not a mantra that is well suited for the Great Power Competition (GPC).<sup>xxiii</sup> The principles of effective intelligence have not changed despite the enablers for it having done so.<sup>xxiv</sup> Intelligence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can only achieve success in GPC through what seems like a return to practices associated with the Cold War and duly enabled by modern technology to supplement them. Thus, considering the US national interests on the African continent—US Military Intelligence (USMI) in Africa must (1) take a network centric approach to integrating itself into a Pan-African IC and (2) obtain deep understanding of the complexity and integrated nature of the continent through the revival of a large base of nuanced geopolitical, sociocultural, and linguistic experts on the region.<sup>xxv</sup>

### *Access to Africa through Networking*

USMI must take a proactive, network-centric approach towards interaction with African intelligence services. A focus on partnerships and relationships (i.e. social networks) is nothing new in AFRICOM's strategic outlook. To emphasize this strategic approach when facing African geopolitical and sociocultural complexities, General Townsend used the word 'partner(s)' or 'partnership(s)' forty-nine times in the 2021 AFRICOM posture statement to the US Congress. In conjunction with the use of the term partner (which emphasize the bilateral nature of the engagement), the terms cooperation and building partner capacity were co-occurrent ten and seven of these times, respectively. General Townsend stated clearly that "enhanced relationships and military activities enable USAFRICOM to help create time and space for our African partners to build the governance and economic growth necessary to gain the capacity to repel malign actors..." and goes on to discuss how building partner capacity (BPC) "reinforc[es] the U.S. role as Africa's security partner of choice" and "further[s] American values and influence."<sup>xxvi</sup> This paper argues that a network-centric approach is a more effective and efficient way to advance US national interests using the same lines of effort that AFRICOM has already been pursuing.

A network-centric approach views African intelligence services as interconnected communities, with each institution forming distinct nodes within the network. This approach aligns with social network theory, which analyzes relationships and interactions between individuals and groups. Enhancing military intelligence efforts in Africa involves influencing key nodes, improving connectivity within the African intelligence community, and ensuring American agencies' centrality or access within this network.

Key Nodes. General Townsend and General Christopher Cavoli, recent Commander US Army Europe/Africa (now EUCOM/NATO), both used the terms access and influence to describe the crux of US strategic competition in Africa.<sup>xxvii</sup> This is because MI access and influence hinge largely on building the strategic relationships mentioned in the posture statement and integrating USMI into African ICs. Individual and/or institutional access to various communities, of course, is created by having relationships with nodes (or individuals) in that network. As the average degree of connectivity between nodes increases, so does the likelihood that any two nodes are connected either directly or indirectly. Therefore, with respect to IC on the African continent, access is thus on the critical path to ensure MI's connectivity with African intelligence services, and it is also a function of the density of connections and average degree of connectivity of nodes in the entire continental network. In order to maximize access and influence per unit of investment (i.e. time and funding), the ideal node to identify and interact with in African networks would be one with access to several other nodes in intelligence networks and ones with irregularly high influence over social networks – called a 'hub' in network science.

Brooking and Singer (2019) highlight how a few key nodes dominate the battle for attention on social media networks.<sup>xxviii</sup> Similarly, General Paul Nakasone's account of

Operation Glowing Symphony reveals how identifying key nodes in ISIS' social media network facilitated effective cyber operations.<sup>xxix</sup> This underscores the importance of technology in intelligence operations and access to big data. However, achieving access and influencing key nodes also requires effective use of human intelligence (HUMINT) assets. Simply investing in technology isn't sufficient; time spent on the ground in Africa is crucial.

Understanding the concept of key nodes from social media interactions, intelligence communities can apply this knowledge to offline human networks, where influential individuals act as hubs. Building and maintaining a broad network of relationships serves as more than just a trust-building exercise; it's an intelligence operation to identify and influence these key nodes. Through these efforts, the US intelligence community can identify and verify assumptions about key nodes in African intelligence communities and human networks that shape public opinion through various media platforms (e.g. radio, television, internet, and in print).

Identification of and focus on key nodes poses various challenges and drawbacks, however, that must be reconciled or mitigated. One of the drawbacks on the continent is the degree of gatekeeping that occurs in African countries. Many gatekeepers are antithetical to US values resulting in challenges with respect to the establishment of cooperative relationships. USMI and the IC in general would have to decide with whom it is worth working. A good example of a gatekeeper in this category was Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, who not only was antithetical to US values but also actively compartmentalized his network in order to keep himself as the most powerful and influential within.<sup>xxx</sup> Despite obvious outliers like the Mugabe example, Darrel Blocker, who served 28 years with the CIA and ultimately as Chief of Africa Division, believes that there is “virtually no barriers or drawbacks to building networks between the [US IC] and foreign [intelligence] services” and that there is “very little downside to engagement between the intelligence community and foreign partners because this is being done daily around the globe, primarily through the CIA.”<sup>xxxi</sup> When an aggressive engagement strategy is pursued, a critical action to prevent the same type of compartmentalization will be to increase the connections, or links, between the nodes with whom USMI does choose to partner. Such an approach also has its drawbacks in the sense that intelligence and counterintelligence work is based on trust. By increasing ‘links’ that trust relationship becomes diluted, increasing vulnerability to compartmentalizing.

*Link Creation and network construction.* Like any network, information can only flow to USMI through the African IC if it is connected, and the ease of flow is dependent on the connectivity of the network. Link creation is, therefore, the primary tool for improving USMI's access to African ICs. Building formal, informal, and institutional relationships (links) between the intelligence services of African countries and those of the US is a critical endeavor and should be a priority for USMI efforts on the African continent. Gaining access to the intelligence/human capital on the continent requires that US Army MI view relationships as investments (as opposed to transactions) and

create enduring (long-term) links between American and African ICs through formalized posts and partnerships.

Staff exchange<sup>xxxii</sup> is a highly effective method for building enduring partnerships at a relatively low cost. Placing American intelligence professionals within African militaries or diplomatic services in advisory roles fosters strong personal and professional relationships. This approach facilitates knowledge transfer and enhances understanding of African complexities among US deployed personnel. Examples from American military academies demonstrate the effectiveness of such exchanges. Amy Ebitz of the Brookings Institution highlights that these exchanges promote interoperability, cultural understanding, and expand each nation's capabilities. She emphasizes that such "military diplomacy" aims to construct dialogue, prevent confusion during crises, and foster further communication between cultures.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Another method of increasing links between USMI and intelligence services on the African continent would be to create a Joint Intelligence Center including African counterparts. Cline argues that "[t]he need for sharply improved intelligence cooperation both within Africa and by African countries with larger intelligence-sharing systems has become increasingly noted by many key figures from the region."<sup>xxxiv</sup> Specifically in the Lake Chad Basin, the Multi-national Joint Task Force suffers from poor intelligence cooperation and coordination in their fight against Boko Haram, as one example.<sup>xxxv</sup> A more expansive and cooperative Joint Intelligence Center could leverage US technological capabilities and funds to create an Africa-based Open Sourced Intelligence (OSINT) center to collect and analyze the immense amounts of unclassified, open-source data that is available. The pursuit of an OSINT strategy at the onset would not only provide robust and immediate products of value but would serve as a foundational means to effectively integrate the participatory elements and assess their capacity for evolving depths of integration and performance capabilities. It could be associated with the first steps towards enduring trust relationships.

Joint intelligence and analysis centers have been pivotal to developing intelligence sharing protocol and building trust between NATO nations, and this same model is applicable to promote similar cooperation between African nations. The Joint Intelligence Operations Center Europe (JIOCEUR) Analytic Center (JAC), previously known as the Joint Analysis Center, is a Joint Intelligence Center serving primarily the US European Command, with an expanded area of responsibility that includes over 50 countries in Europe, 33 Sub-Saharan and West African countries, and portions of the Middle East. This application does not necessarily require creating NATO-level sophistication, however, and intelligence cooperation is something that the US has been doing on the African continent for decades albeit mostly through the CIA.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Effectiveness through a network-centric lens is not solely dependent upon key nodes and links. It must be enabled with the placement of persistent, enduring and suitable USMI within the larger African IC network. This is not merely small elements within the country team, but rather robust staff elements that can be integrated into the host nation. This effort would be costly at the onset with the construction of sensitive

compartmented information facilities (SCIF) and the costs of living allowances for assigned personnel, but can be less significant when compared against the same costs levied for personnel currently assigned to the European continent. This sounds very plausible but is in fact extremely ambitious due to complexity of intra-African relations compounded by US-Africa relations and expanding/strengthening African relations with countries such as Russia<sup>xxxvii</sup>, China<sup>xxxviii</sup> and Iran<sup>xxxix</sup> on the back of a perception that the West is weakening. It will take an enormous amount of trust building capital to create robust staff elements that can be integrated into the host nation.

*Centrality.* The creation of an intelligence cooperative as described would increase the “centrality” of the US within the larger African intelligence network, thus increasing the capability of the US to collect and diffuse information through this network. Increasing the US IC’s centrality in the network allows maximum connectivity, or access, to nodes in the network. This maximizes the amount of information the US can collect. Centrality of the US may be a double-edged sword, however. Although it allows for the greatest potential of information flowing through USMI nodes, it also allows for the greatest amount of collected mis- and disinformation and it perhaps poses the highest risk of compromise or infiltration. Of course, the mitigation to this risk is highly dependent on USMI and the IC at large to be able to filter out this poor information as it already does, but this requires maintaining the colossal, but effective, IC that the US has built in the past century. Establishing such a Joint capability on the African continent also presuppose that there will be an African country willing to welcome this facility within its sovereign borders. Considering the track record of AFRICOM in such a context and the distrust associated with intelligence work and more so with the US, it is an extremely ambitious undertaking that will probably only be possible once AFRICOM has actually found an African home which could then be expanded at a later stage to include a joint intelligence center.

Building a large, heavily connected network out of the compartmentalized African IC is something that also provides for increased diffusion of information. Diffusion of US narratives (i.e. supporting information and psychological operations on the continent) is central to proactively building access and influence on the continent. The ability of a highly connected, centralized USMI to diffuse narratives is much greater than one that is silo-ed into various unconnected subnetworks across the African continent. High centrality and connectivity also facilitate the direct diffusion of strategic narratives that need to reach the entire continent, while still permitting more focused narratives to reach only subsections of this network. Staff elements of Defense Attaché’s office in the respective countries and its integration into the wider networks can effectively manage this focused and localized effort within borders as well as across regionally aligned collaborations.

Once again, it would be irresponsible not to address the risks of such a strategy. As it has historically and currently operated, the African IC is a closed system-of-systems – very resistant to security breaches but also not very good at cooperation. If the US was to create a highly interconnected network that would facilitate a more open approach

to intelligence sharing, it would enhance cooperation but also increase the risk of security breaches and thus compromised trust relationships. A large, highly interconnected network of IC elites may be a vessel for diffusion of covert subversive movements, criminal networks, or mis-/disinformation. A great variety of actors can take advantage of such a system, especially with the personal influence many in the community may have.<sup>xi</sup> The mitigation to this strategy entails a highly coordinated accompanying whole-of-government approach. Although coordination is labor intensive and has its own unique barriers, using the whole of government to carefully select partners with whom to work, in order to create the network as described, will have the potential to yield great return on investment.

*Comprehensive Approach.* Although it is outside the scope of USMI's capabilities alone, a "whole-of-society approach which transcends government-to-government relations and leverages the contributions of civil society and business" is ideal and also more resilient against the fluctuations of continuity within governments.<sup>xii</sup> As previously discussed, the Chinese model of a centralized, authoritarian state that can control and influence all facets of their engagement is a formidable instrument. For the US and its allies to compete, this translates in to an expansive and innovate approach that would include private companies among friendly nations in the intelligence network, thus decreasing US governments' direct cost in the operation, and increasing the amount and diversification of institutional ties between US and African entities. Incorporation of private US and European firms into the African intelligence framework serves three purposes. First, it multiplies opportunities for building relationships between US, European, and African elites that can be leveraged to gain access to the continent. Second, it bolsters a budding intelligence and security-based market for Western firms in the region which can aid local IC's and governments in improving their intelligence and security capabilities – providing an alternative to similar, but predatory, Russian and Chinese firms. Third, the competitive nature of private corporations allows for quicker innovation in intelligence protocols and tools, trailblazing for the slower national intelligence apparatus.

However, sharing intelligence responsibilities with contractors also comes with risks. Outsourcing intelligence may be "financially and structurally deleterious and undermines US constitutional governance when contractors are allowed to perform inherently governmental activities," according to just one of many academic treatises that defend the national governments monopoly on strategic intelligence.<sup>xiii</sup> This will most certainly also be a deal-breaker for African countries that are already intelligence cooperation shy. All intelligence sharing and cooperation comes with risk, but it also comes with reward. Each time information is shared with another individual or service increases the risk that that piece of intelligence is being leaked. Some partners are more trustworthy or have better tradecraft than others, which is why there are protocols for sharing that are very permissive for NATO countries and not for others. Although it is not the purpose of this piece to conduct a detailed risk analysis, it would be negligent not to recognize the risks associated with this suggestion.

Benefits and risks aside, this recommendation is still a way off and will require a large cultural shift. “Until Corporate America embraces the needs of and incorporates the national security interests...into their marketing strategies,” Blocker states that “the USG will continue to lose ground to those totalitarian and non-democratic regimes who control their media, their industries and their populace, i.e. China, Russia”.<sup>xliii</sup> Even if this is achieved there is also the requirement to recognize the national interests of each individual African partner state and maximize every effort to align US national interest with African partner interests. If such an alignment cannot be achieved it will be very difficult to create a shared space for cooperation and intelligence sharing.

### *Influence Informed by Regional Expertise*

The advantage USMI gains through accessing and building networks must be consolidated with influence gained through regional expertise. Influence is, in turn, gained over the networks built in the previous section by applying the wisdom and understanding that comes with a large base of expertise on nuanced regional complexities and languages.<sup>xliv</sup> Promoting the study of nuanced regional matters and utilizing technology to augment scarce human resources is the two-pronged solution for disseminating a narrative that matters to the local population through networks to which the US, as a local partner, have access.

*Big Tech.* The Global War on Terror is a great exposition of how big data and technology have transformed the art of intelligence. Robotics capabilities have transformed ISR collection; cyber capabilities have changed the art of intelligence collection, communications, and messaging; artificial intelligence and machine learning have transformed the collection and analysis of immense amounts of content, both open-source and otherwise. Big data and greatly advanced technological capabilities can perform many functions more efficiently than can humans – such as collection, analysis, and identification of various targets. However, technology is not a substitute for the human portion of intelligence operations, but rather it is a compliment to them. The human job in intelligence requires greater ability to contextualize the massive amounts of content collected, to glean something that is culturally important from trends elucidated by big data’s efficient ‘nets’, and to use regional expertise to direct collection and analyses that are now supplemented by technological capabilities.

*Regional Expertise.* The IC is the primary means for building a narrative that matters to the local population but that are also aligned with national interests. Narratives that matter to local populations are the only ones that will be effective, and this means that IO and PSYOPS must be informed by a very adept USMI. This understanding of narrative-building underpins the US strategy, and MI – among other members of the IC – is the key effort in getting the strategy’s basic assumptions right. An adept USMI on the African continent can help the entire military and US strategic apparatus to counter adversarial narratives and provide more palatable or more desirable US alternatives to these narratives. Utilizing intelligence about what is important to African populations, elites and elders underpins any effort to delegitimize US adversaries in the areas of

interest and operations. This understanding comes only with in-depth knowledge of the various African states' socio-cultural, linguistic, political, and economic environments. Human assets that are inserted into the area of interest or operation or home-grown local assets will greatly assist in unlocking a nuanced understanding of the operational environment.

Creating an education pathway or otherwise incentivizing individuals' investment in to a great variety of much nuanced matters is something that is very difficult. However, outsourcing expertise on nuanced regional matters to locals themselves is something that has a relatively low cost, and which also reinforces the trust-building networks with African IC's described previously. As locals are already experts in the region, their nuanced expertise can be leveraged or 'translated' with lesser reliance on need for US experts. The nuanced expertise in question contextualizes the content collected in a large intelligence apparatus such as a cooperative OSINT center one or more African countries. Additionally, this OSINT center can serve as a locale for educating and training US and European officers in local socio-cultural matters while Western IC officers help to construct and/or refine local African intelligence apparatuses.

### *Conclusion: The Way Forward in Africa*

The US established its significant presence in Djibouti's Camp Lemonnier in 2003, alongside Chinese, French, Japanese, Saudi Arabian, and United Arab Emirates bases. Currently, there are around 7,000 US military personnel deployed daily across Africa, supporting humanitarian efforts and joint operations against extremist threats. Additionally, over 2,000 soldiers are engaged in training or advisory missions in over 40 African countries, with Special Operations Forces operating in East Africa.

France also maintains a substantial presence, with over 7,500 military personnel in the Sahel region. While this engagement lays the groundwork for defense and security capacity, the question remains whether it can achieve the strategic impact needed for effective USMI and mobilize other national elements.

The pursuit of an integrated network-centric approach to USMI in Africa, combined with an understanding of the region's complexities, is essential. While technology is vital, human intelligence (HUMINT) and regional expertise are equally crucial in cultivating relationships and tailoring narratives that resonate with local populations. Outsourcing regional expertise to locals can strengthen trust-building networks with African intelligence services.

This approach holds promise for fostering enduring partnerships and enhancing US influence across the African intelligence landscape. However, navigating geopolitical dynamics and balancing risk, trust-building, and regional cooperation present challenges. Future research should explore the potential benefits of enhanced collaboration, such as Public Private Partnerships, to further US interests and those of African allies.

### *Data Availability Statement*

No new data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing does not apply to this article.

### *Notes on Contributors*

Dries Putter is the School Chair for Security and Africa Studies and a Senior Lecturer in Defence Intelligence Studies at the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University. He obtained his PhD in Military Sciences from Stellenbosch University in 2019. Affiliation: Stellenbosch University; Affiliate Member, National Security Hub, University of Canberra; Researcher, Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA); Researcher, African Research Institute – Óbuda University, Hungary.

John Melkon II is a PhD Candidate in Military Sciences at Stellenbosch University. He holds various degrees including an AB from Princeton, and MAs at Columbia and Texas A&M University. He is an Assistant Professor of Geography at the United States Military Academy at West Point, the Director of the Center for the Study of Civil-Military Operations and serves as an Extraordinary Professor of Practice at North West University in South Africa. He is a retired US Army Special Forces Officer with combat experience in the Middle East and operational experience in Africa. Affiliation: West Point, USA.

Brock A. Salgado is First Lieutenant in the U.S. Army's First Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF), a unit at the forefront of the Army's modernization program. As a Field Artillery Officer, he is assigned to 5-3 Long Range Fires Battalion (LRFB) where he has served as a Platoon Leader for both the HIMARS Battery and the Long-Range Hypersonic Battery. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point where he earned a Bachelor of Science with a Major in Arabic a Minor in Grand Strategy. Affiliation: West Point, USA.

---

<sup>i</sup> Seldin, US Intelligence Warns China, Russia Determined to Erode Washington's Influence.

<sup>ii</sup> Asch and Winkler, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Hanauer and Morris, China in Africa Implications of a Deepening Relationship.

<sup>iv</sup> Neethling, Why Foreign Countries Are Scrambling to Set up Bases in Africa.

<sup>v</sup> Since 1956 China has set up missions in 52 countries but has maintained ~47 (currently the Chinese Foreign Service website lists 44 states with Chinese Embassies, but it is outdated) China lacks embassies in Burkina Faso, Gambia, Malawi, Somalia, South Sudan. It is notable, however, that the US DOS still lists 52 embassies in Africa as of 2021 (not including the territories within S Africa) - notably missing Congo, Sao Tome/Principe,

<sup>vi</sup> "In 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed that China would create a "Silk Road Economic Belt" across Central Asia and Europe and a "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" running through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, on to the Middle East and Europe — programs meant to revive ancient trade routes and reinforce existing ones. Beijing quickly

- 
- wove these two visions together and dubbed them the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).” (Dollar, Understanding China's belt and road infrastructure projects in Africa.
- vii Sow, Figures of the week: Chinese investment in Africa.
  - viii Sawahel, Confucius Institutes increase as another opens in Djibouti.
  - ix Nantulya, China's United Front Strategy in Africa.
  - x Nantulya, China's Blended Approach to Security in Africa.
  - xi <https://www.africom.mil/document/35173/africom-cleared-fy24-sasc-posture-hearing-16-mar-2023pdf>. p.2.
  - xii Op cit, China's Blended Approach to Security in Africa.
  - xiii [http://focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/hyqk\\_1/t1594297.htm](http://focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/hyqk_1/t1594297.htm)
  - xiv Gramer, Detsch and Haverty, China's Building Projects in Africa Are a Spymaster's Dream.
  - xv Ibid.
  - xvi Op cit, US Intelligence Warns China, Russia Determined to Erode Washington's Influence.
  - xvii <https://www.africom.mil/document/35173/africom-cleared-fy24-sasc-posture-hearing-16-mar-2023pdf>. p.4.
  - xviii Shedd, The Intelligence Posture America Needs in an Age of Great-Power Competition.
  - xix Schiff, The U.S. Intelligence Community Is Not Prepared for the China Threat.
  - xx Lyammouri and Eddazi, Russian Interference in Africa: Disinformation and Mercenaries.
  - xxi Singer, and Brooking, LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.
  - xxii Shultz and Clarke, Big Data at War: Special Operations Forces, Project Maven, and Twenty-First-Century Warfare.
  - xxiii Cobb, Intelligence Adaptation.
  - xxiv Shedd, The Intelligence Posture America Needs in an Age of Great-Power Competition." 2021 Index of U.S. Military Strength. November 17, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/2021-index-us-military-strength/topical-essays/the-intelligence-posture-america-needs-age-great>.
  - xxv Ibid; Op cit, LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media; Cook, and Collins, PSYOP, Cyber, and InfoWar: Combating the New Age IED; and McGurk, More than Just Friends: The Strategic Advantage of Enduring Relationships.
  - xxvi United States. Africa: Securing U.S. Interests, Preserving Strategic Options. 2021 Posture Statement to Congress.
  - xxvii Ibid and Cavoli, Noon Report - Gen. Christopher Cavoli - U.S. Army Europe and Africa.
  - xxviii Op cit, LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.
  - xxix Temple-Raston, How the U.S. Hacked ISIS.
  - xxx Mellon and Evans, Volatile Elite Networks and the Race for the Zimbabwean Succession.
  - xxxi Blocker, Intelligence Challenges with GPC in Africa.
  - xxxii For example- “The Military Representative Exchange Programme “is a coordinated international exchange program with NATO militaries to help develop cultural understanding, regional expertise and language proficiency and interoperability.” (<https://www.usar.army.mil/ExchangeProgram/>, also see <https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/Inside-M-RA/Reserve-Integration/How-We-Support/Military-Reserve-Exchange-Program/>)
  - xxxiii Myers, The Importance of Educating Foreign Military Officers; and Ebitz, The Use of Military Diplomacy in Great Power Competition.
  - xxxiv Cline, *African Regional Intelligence Cooperation: Problems and Prospects*.
  - xxxv Crisis Group, What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?
  - xxxvi Opsit, Intelligence Challenges with GPC in Africa.
  - xxxvii Ferragamo, Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa.
  - xxxviii Op cit, China in Africa Implications of a Deepening Relationship.
  - xxxix Naeni, “Iran's renewed Africa policy: Raisi's ambition and the perception of Western decline.
  - xl Louni and Subbalakshmi, Diffusion of Information in Social Networks.
  - xli Pham, A Measured US Strategy for the New Africa.



- <sup>xlii</sup> Gale, Intelligence Outsourcing in the U.S. Department of Defense: Theory, Practice, and Implications; and Storm, Outsourcing Intelligence Analysis: Legal and Policy Risks.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Op cit, Intelligence Challenges with GPC in Africa.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Asch, and Winkler, Ensuring Language Capability in the Intelligence Community: What Factors Affect the Best Mix of Military, Civilians, and Contractors?

## References

- Asch, B.J. and Winkler, J. *Ensuring Language Capability in the Intelligence Community: What Factors Affect the Best Mix of Military, Civilians, and Contractors?* Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013.
- Blocker, D. Intelligence Challenges with GPC in Africa. E-mail interview by authors. October 26, 2021.
- Cavoli, C. "Noon Report - Gen. Christopher Cavoli - U.S. Army Europe and Africa." Interview. *Association of the US Army*. February 3. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdCZcqOzKz4>. [Accessed xxxxxxxx], 2021.
- Cline, L.E. *African Regional Intelligence Cooperation: Problems and Prospects*. International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence, 29, no. 3 (2016): 447-469, doi: 10.1080/08850607.2016.1148479
- Cobb, A. Intelligence Adaptation. The RUSI Journal 156, no. 4 (August 19: 54-62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2011.606651>, 2011.
- Cook, C. and Liam Collins, L PSYOP, Cyber, and InfoWar: Combating the New Age IED. Modern War Institute. April 12, 2021. Available: <https://mwi.usma.edu/psyop-cyber-and-infowar-combating-the-new-age-ied/>.
- Crisis Group. What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram? Crisis Group. January 22, 2021. Available: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/291-what-role-multinational-joint-task-force-fighting-boko-haram>
- David Dollar. Understanding China's belt and road infrastructure projects in Africa. Brookings, September 2019. Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-chinas-belt-and-road-infrastructure-projects-in-africa/>.
- Ebitz, Amy. "The Use of Military Diplomacy in Great Power Competition." Brookings.edu. February 12, 2019. Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/02/12/the-use-of-military-diplomacy-in-great-power-competition/>.
- Ferragamo, M. Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa. Foreign Relations Council, 28 December 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/background/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.
- Gale, J.B. Intelligence Outsourcing in the U.S. Department of Defense: Theory, Practice, and Implications. Master's thesis, Georgetown School of Arts and Sciences, 2011.

- Gramer, R., Detsch, J. and Haverty, D. China's Building Projects in Africa Are a Spymaster's Dream. Foreign Policy. May 21, 2020. Available: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/21/china-infrastructure-projects-africa-surveillance-spy-master-dream/>.
- Hanauer, L. and Morris, L.J. China in Africa Implications of a Deepening Relationship. Rand Corp., 13 December 2013. Available: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9760.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9760.html).
- Louni, A. and Subbalakshmi K.P. (2014) Diffusion of Information in Social Networks. In, Panda M., Dehuri S., Wang GN. (eds) Social Networking. Intelligent Systems Reference Library, vol 65. Springer, Cham. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-05164-2\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-05164-2_1)
- Lyammouri, R. and Eddazi, Y. Russian Interference in Africa: Disinformation and Mercenaries. Africa Portal. June 30, 2020. <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/russian-interference-africa-disinformation-and-mercenaries/>.
- McGurk, M. More than Just Friends: The Strategic Advantage of Enduring Relationships. Modern War Institute. June 29, 2021. Available: <https://mwi.usma.edu/more-than-just-friends-the-strategic-advantage-of-enduring-relationships/>.
- Mellon, J. and Evans, D. *Volatile Elite Networks and the Race for the Zimbabwean Succession* (November 15, 2017). Available: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3071782> or DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3071782>
- Myers, D. The Importance of Educating Foreign Military Officers. The Importance of Educating Foreign Military Officers. August 17, 2018. Available: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/importance-educating-foreign-military-officers>.
- Naeni, A. Iran's renewed Africa policy: Raisi's ambition and the perception of Western decline. Middle East Institute, 31 July 2023. Available: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-renewed-africa-policy-raisis-ambition-and-perception-western-decline>.
- Nantulya, P. China's Blended Approach to Security in Africa. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. July 30, 2021. Available: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/chinas-blended-approach-security-africa-31216>.
- Nantulya, P. China's United Front Strategy in Africa. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 5, 2023. Available: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-united-front-africa/>.
- Neethling, T. Why Foreign Countries Are Scrambling to Set up Bases in Africa. The Conversation. October 20, 2021. Available: <https://theconversation.com/why-foreign-countries-are-scrambling-to-set-up-bases-in-africa-146032>.



- Sawahel, W. Confucius Institutes increase as another opens in Djibouti. University World News, 6 April 2023. Available: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2023040505021956#:~:text=61%20Confucius%20Institutes%20have%20been,in%202005%20in%20Nairobi%2C%20Kenya.>
- Schiff, A. The U.S. Intelligence Community Is Not Prepared for the China Threat. Foreign Affairs. October 07, 2020. Available: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-09-30/us-intelligence-community-not-prepared-china-threat.>
- Seldin, J. US Intelligence Warns China, Russia Determined to Erode Washington's Influence. VOA, April 13, 2021. Available: [https://www.voanews.com/a/usa\\_us-intelligence-warns-china-russia-determined-erode-washingtons-influence/6204545.html.](https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_us-intelligence-warns-china-russia-determined-erode-washingtons-influence/6204545.html.)
- Shedd, D. R. The Intelligence Posture America Needs in an Age of Great-Power Competition. 2021 Index of U.S. Military Strength. November 17, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/2021-index-us-military-strength/topical-essays/the-intelligence-posture-america-needs-age-great.>
- Shultz, R.H., and Clarke, R.D. Big Data at War: Special Operations Forces, Project Maven, and Twenty-First-Century Warfare. Modern War Institute. March 25, 2021. Available: <https://mwi.usma.edu/big-data-at-war-special-operations-forces-project-maven-and-twenty-first-century-warfare/.>
- Singer, P. W. and Emerson T. Brooking. *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*. Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.
- Sow, M. Figures of the week: Chinese investment in Africa. Brookings Institute, September 6, 2018. Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/figures-of-the-week-chinese-investment-in-africa/#:~:text=Throughout%20the%20continent%2C%20Chinese%20investment,%2C%20and%20Zambia%2C%20among%20others.>
- Storm, J. R. Outsourcing Intelligence Analysis: Legal and Policy Risks. *Journal of National Security Law and Policy* 9, no. 3 (May 30, 2018). Available: [https://jnslp.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Outsourcing\\_Intelligence\\_Analysis\\_2.pdf.](https://jnslp.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Outsourcing_Intelligence_Analysis_2.pdf.)
- Temple-Raston, D. How The U.S. Hacked ISIS. NPR, September 26, 2019. Available: <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/26/763545811/how-the-u-s-hacked-isis.>
- United States. Africa: Securing U.S. Interests, Preserving Strategic Options. 2021 Posture Statement to Congress - *Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander United States Africa Command*. [Washington, DC]: U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, April 20. Available: <https://www.africom.mil/document/33691/usafricom-statement-for-record-hasc-20-apr-2021-gen-townsendpdf.> 2021
- United States. African Security In A Global Context. 2023 Posture Statement to Congress - *Statement of General Michael E. Langley, United States Marine Corps Commander, United States Africa Command*. The Senate Armed Services Committee. [Washington, DC]:16 March 2023. Available;

---

<https://www.africom.mil/document/35173/africom-cleared-fy24-sasc-posture-hearing-16-mar-2023pdf>.

United States. Investing in America's security in Africa: a continent of growing strategic importance. 2022 Posture Statement to Congress - Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander, United States Africa Command. [Washington] U.S. Senate Armed Forces Committee. March 15. Available: <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20%20ISO%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Cleared.pdf>. 2022

United States. Military Representative Programme. U.S. Army Reserve. Available: <https://www.usar.army.mil/ExchangeProgram/> [Accessed 25 January 2024].

United States. Military Reserve Exchange Program (MREP). Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness. Available: <https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/Inside-M-RA/Reserve-Integration/How-We-Support/Military-Reserve-Exchange-Program/> [Accessed 25 January 2024].

Pham, J. Peter. "A Measured US Strategy for the New Africa." *The Atlantic Council Strategy Papers*, December 2016. Available: [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AC\\_StrategyPapers\\_No7\\_Africa\\_F-WEB.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AC_StrategyPapers_No7_Africa_F-WEB.pdf).